Recitation or Re-creation? A Reconsideration

Recitation or Re-creation? A Reconsideration: Verbal Consistency in the Gaelic Storytelling of Duncan MacDonald

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Introduction

One of the most intriguing aspects of Scottish Gaelic traditional narrative is the similarity of certain hero tales, collected orally in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, to older, manuscript versions belonging to the linguistic period known as Early Modern Gaelic.[1] These are the *romances*, defined by Alan Bruford as 'rambling episodic stories of battle and magic, sometimes loosely unified by a quest theme'[2] and 'original prose hero-tales written … from the late twelfth to the early nineteenth centuries which were not intended to be read principally as history or allegory'.[3] The tales took cues from contemporaneous European literary works, but were also a continuation of the native Gaelic prose tradition that had preceded them for over 700 years.[4] Similarities between the oral and literary versions are close enough to indicate that they most likely have one of two origins. Either the literary ones ultimately derive from pre-existing oral sources,[5] or they were composed near to the time that they were written down and subsequently oralised. Bruford himself weighs in strongly on the latter position, but because the tales are almost entirely anonymous and we have little information about their creation, it is unlikely that we will ever know for certain how much debt they owe to pre-existing oral folklore.[6]

The tale versions recorded from oral tradition share much of their thematic substance and, occasionally, surface forms with the literate ones. As some of the words and phrases in modern Scottish Gaelic versions can be traced back to Classical Gaelic manuscripts,[7] these are remarkable survivals, not only of the older tales' motif structure, but of some of their antiquated language, character names and toponyms.

Oral language of a formal or ritualistic nature has been found to resemble written prose in certain ways, for instance in tendencies towards fossilisation of language and formulaic expression.[8] In light of this, it is interesting to note Bruford's observation[9] that at least one 20th century Gaelic storyteller – Duncan MacDonald[10] (1883-1954) of Snishaval, South Uist – recited his hero tales in a virtually word-for-word fashion, yet varied the language that he used in renditions of other, less formal storytelling genres (e.g. *Märchen*[11]) considerably more:

On the verbal consistency of Duncan MacDonald's hero tales

> …for the most part all six texts [of 'Fear na h-Eabaid'] are almost identical in wording. … Brief comparisons of the different versions of other tales of this type which Duncan told – the other four printed by Craig (1944[12]) in fact – suggest equal if not greater consistency in wording.[13]

On the more varied recitation of his *Märchen*

> Duncan MacDonald did, however, tell a great many other stories not belonging to this genre of long, rather literary folktales…. [His] recorded repertoire includes a few long folktales of the international *Märchen* type, also learned from his father, and these seem to have been re-told on a remembered framework in a much more normal way.[14]

> …[he] had told other tales which he valued less highly, both international Märchen and local legends, in entirely new words each time: so there could be different treatments for different tales or genres of tale in the repertoire of one storyteller…[15]

> There is no doubt that Duncan had memorised only the barest framework of this story ['Triùir Mhac Rìgh Èireann'] and had to recreate minor details and wording each time he told it.[16]

> Two tellings of *Am fear a thug am boireannach as an Tuirc…* are equally diverse in narration.[17]

The main difference between many of the hero tales that Duncan MacDonald told and the *Märchen* that were in his repertoire is the fact that the hero tales may have their origins in an earlier prose tradition. It is intriguing to speculate that story-tellers such as Duncan's grandfather[18] could have transmitted these romances in a manner that recognised their literate provenance on some level. Writing, of course, provides a fixed reference point and a state of semi-permanence, and the awareness of literacy and its implications could have engendered an aesthetic ideal of sorts. It is

clear, for example, that certain tradition bearers judged themselves and each other on the basis of how precise their tellings of certain tales were against an internalised 'text'.

It may also be the case that verbal consistency was associated with perceived formality, both thematic and situational. For instance, the stories' content is often tied up with the nobility of an older age and marked, high-register speech occasionally appears.[19] Additionally, the traditional Scottish Gaelic storytelling event itself, such as described by Campbell,[20] can be considered formal on a number of grounds.[21] Register theory could certainly be used to help explain the differences observed between the romances and other oral narrative genres,[22] but it is compelling to entertain the possibility that a type of literate aesthetic came down in oral tradition bundled up with these particular tales.[23] If Duncan MacDonald's romances were found to be more verbally consistent across various renditions than his *Märchen*, it would suggest that this is the case. The present study was designed to investigate this issue, deploying an empirical, corpus-based method.

Methodology

The School of Scottish Studies' Tale Archive, and two on-line resources[24] were used to locate and compile all of the hero tales and international folktales that were recorded from Duncan on multiple occasions. There was considerable variance in the numbers of available versions, with a tale like 'Fear na h-Eabaid' ('The Man with the Habit') having been collected six times, but others, such as 'Na Trì Comhairlichean' ('The Three Counsels': ATU 910 B), only once. Recent research[25] has concluded that several of the tales that collector Donald John MacDonald[26] attributed to Duncan in his manuscripts, as well as to his brother Neil, are in fact copied more or less word-for-word from the narratives of Duncan published by K C Craig in an edition of *Béaloideas*[27] and in the book *Sgialachdan Dhunnchaidh*.[28] This issue, in particular, impacts the number of hero tales that are available for comparison in the present study, but also some of the *Märchen* as well, such as ATU 517 below.[29] Where there were grounds for doubting the fidelity of any of Donald John's versions, they were excluded from the analysis. Overall, and partly because of this, the dataset is limited.

The following tables provide a list of the tales in the present corpus, along with their sources and word counts. Many of these are available as streaming audio on the *Tobar an Dualchais* website, and the URLs may be located by following the

relevant notes. All of the texts that were taken from Calum Maclean's manuscripts, apart from ATU 550 below, are also available on-line (see note 24 for URL).

Abbreviations

CIM	Calum Iain Maclean (1915-1960), folklore collector for the Irish Folklore Commission and the School of Scottish Studies
DJM	Donald John MacDonald (see note 26 for information)
DJM-D	Duncan MacDonald's texts in the Donald John MacDonald collection
DJM-N	Neil MacDonald's texts in the Donald John MacDonald collection
IFC	The Irish Folklore Commission
JLC	John Lorne Campbell (1906-1996), Gaelic scholar and folklore collector

Table 1: *Märchen* samples used in corpus (3593 words in total)

	Version			
Märchen	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**
Am Fear a Thug am Boireannach às an Tuirc (ATU 506)[30]	DJM 9/9/53 pp. 390-438 371 words	Craig (1949) pp. 134-144 232 words	CIM[31] 31/01/49 IFC MS 1156 pp. 202-237 373 words	JLC[32] Tape ID: CW0083.331 07/12/50 410 words
Sgialachd Mhic an Ridire Albannaich (ATU 517)[33]	Craig (1947) pp. 231-245 357 words	CIM[34] 11/01/49 IFC MS 1171 pp. 472-492 272 words		
Mar a Thug Nighean a' Chruiteir a-mach an t-Uachdaran (ATU 875)[35]	Craig (1949) pp. 144-150 282 words	CIM 24/01/48 IFC MS 1053 pp. 468-491 342 words		
Triùir Mhac Rìgh Èireann (ATU 550)[36]	DJM 22/08/53 366-389 314 words	CIM SA 1953/233/A1 327 words	BBC[37] MOD 1953 LP29061 313 words	

Table 2: Hero tale (romance) samples used in corpus (5115 words in total)

	Version				
Romances	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Conall Gulban	Dòmhnallach & Craig (1950) pp. 45-58 246 words	CIM 26/1/48 IFC MS 1054 pp. 1-57 290 words	JLC[38] 17/02/50 Tape ID: CW0066 271 words		
Eachdraidh Mhànuis[39]	Dòmhnallach & Craig (1950) pp. 1-16 244 words	CIM 08/01/49 IFC MS 1179 pp. 207-266 420 words	JLC[40] 16/02/50 Tape ID: CW0063 436 words		
Fear na h-Eabaid[41]	McClements 1936 323 words 323 words	Dòmhnallach & Craig (1950) pp. 17-29 351 words	CIM 1947 IFC MS 1031 152-185 348 words	JLC[42] 1950 Tape ID: CW0054.235 362 words	CIM 1953 Tape ID: SA 1953/34 A4-35 A1 390 words
Sgeulachd an Tuaireisgeil Mhòir[43]	Dòmhnallach & Craig (1950) pp 30-44 258 words	CIM 10/01/48 IFC MS 1053 pp 408-460 258 words	JLC 15/02/50 Tape ID CW0056[44] 318 words		

The samples consisted of the first roughly 250-450 words of each tale. They were made to be as semantically equivalent as possible by trimming the different versions of each tale after identical thematic episodes. Additionally, they were orthographically standardised by using the Gaelic Orthographic Conventions[45] as a guide. Achieving orthographic consistency is important for the reliability of automatic textual analysis.

WordSmith Tools,[46] a widely available corpus linguistics application, was used to search the texts and implement the quantitative measure used, the *Dice similarity coefficient*.[47] This test gauges the similarity (i.e. lexical intersection)

between two texts on the basis of shared tokens (i.e. words) and is described by the following formula:

$$D(x,y) = \frac{2|x \cap y|}{|x \cup y|}$$

For the current purposes, the measure is formed by calculating twice the overall number of shared words in documents *x* and *y*, and dividing it by the number of unique words found in document *x* along with the number of unique words in document *y*. The relation value obtained can range between 0 and 1, with 0 indicating that there is no overlap between the texts (i.e. that they are completely different) and 1 indicating that they are the same. It would be useful to have a measure that takes syntactic relationships into consideration, as the Dice coefficient and related calculations, such as the Cosine coefficient, essentially discard this information and are limited to one-to-one lexical comparisons. This could be overcome by utilising a non-overlapping n-gram[48] counter, perhaps in conjunction with the approach taken here, but this is a desideratum for future work, and has yet to be designed as far as I am aware.

Results

The Dice relation values for each of the eight stories[49] were calculated in the form of pair-wise comparisons (see Table 4 for an example), and then averaged together to provide a measure of each story's lexical consistency. Finally, these eight consistency measures were averaged together to provide the overall level of each genre's verbal consistency. If Duncan told his romantic tales in a more verbally consistent way than his *Märchen*, one would expect their average relation value to be significantly higher. Table 3 below presents the results:

Table 3: Dice values for *Märchen* vs. Romantic Tales

Märchen	N	D	Romantic Tales	N	D
Nighean a' Chruiteir	2	0.632	*Conall Gulbann*	3	0.691
Boireannach às an Tuirc	4	0.575	*Eachdraidh Mhànuis*	3	0.640
Mac an Ridire	2	0.771	*Fear na h-Eabaid*	5	0.837
Triùir Mhac Rìgh Èireann	3	0.676	*Tuairisgeul Mòr*	3	0.699

	11	**0.663**		**14**	**0.717**

A two-tailed, independent samples *t* test was used to compare the group means (0.663 and 0.717) with the result of p=0.401. This indicates that the difference between the Dice values of the two genres is statistically non-significant.

Discussion

Although this is an exploratory study, using samples rather than full texts, the result does not support the conclusion that Duncan MacDonald told his hero tales with more verbal consistency than his *Märchen*. This is a surprising finding considering Alan Bruford's aforementioned observations about the texts. It must be pointed out, however, that Bruford was working under the assumption that Donald John MacDonald's 'transcriptions' were legitimate. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, many of the hero tales – and some of the *Märchen* – that were attributed to Duncan in his collection were copied in a near word-for-word fashion from the published work of K C Craig. Bruford saw an 'almost identical' correspondence between the texts because a significant proportion of them – two out of four in several cases – were fundamentally the same. His conclusions were sound but, unbeknownst to him, his data was corrupt.

On the other hand, the verbal inconsistency that Bruford perceived between Duncan's *Märchen* may well have been conditioned by the same corrupt data, or to be precise, the lack thereof. The versions of the two *Märchen* tales that he chose for comparison in his 1979 article[50] – 'Triùir Mhac Rìgh Èireann' and 'Am Fear a Thug am Boireannach às an Tuirc' – are legitimate, judging by their Dice coefficient values. These are listed below for reference:

Table 4: Dice values for 'Triùir Mhac Rìgh Èireann'

File 1	File 2	Relation
BBC	CIM	0.706
BBC	DJM	0.657
CIM	DJM	0.664

Table 5: Dice values for 'Am Fear a Thug am Boireannach às an Tuirc'

File 1	File 2	Relation
CIM	JLC	0.603
CIM	Craig	0.600
DJM	JLC	0.587
CIM	DJM	0.564
Craig	DJM	0.555
Craig	JLC	0.544

As is visible from Table 4 and Table 5, the values cluster around the 0.5 to 0.7 region and the statistical range is quite small (0.042 and 0.059 respectively), showing that they are of a comparable level of (dis-)similarity to one another. However, in comparison, when examining the values obtained for the hero tale 'Conall Gulban' (in Table 6), including the texts from Donald John's collection, it is apparent that the data divide into two separate groups. The range in this case is 0.27, which is much higher than in the previous two tables above and a reflection of the outliers that are present.

Table 6: Dice coefficient results for the beginning of 'Conall Gulban' (from Lamb 2011)

File 1	File 2	Relation
Craig	DJM-D	0.93
DJM-D	DJM-N	0.90
Craig	DJM-N	0.88
CIM	Craig	0.70
DJM-D	JLC	0.70
CIM	JLC	0.69
CIM	DJM-D	0.69
JLC	DJM-N	0.68
Craig	JLC	0.67
CIM	DJM-N	0.66

While the Dice values of the non-shaded section of the table are in the same general region (i.e, 0.5 to 0.7) as the other texts in the current study, the texts of 'Conall Gulban' from the Donald John MacDonald collection correlate much more closely with the version published by Craig in *Sgialachdan Dhunnchaidh*. As mentioned

above, Donald John used the texts in *Sgialachdan Dhunnchaidh* as the basis of tales that he provided to the School of Scottish Studies in his father's (and his uncle's) name. He used another source as well[51]—tales of Duncan MacDonald that Craig published in an issue of *Béaloideas*[52]—which may have been available to him in the form of an off-print. This source contains two stories, 'Gruagach nan Sealg' or 'The Lady of the Hunts', a Fenian tale—which Donald John clearly used as the basis of the version that he attributed to Duncan in his collection—and another of the *Märchen*-type, 'Mac an Ridire Albannaich', 'Son of the Scottish Knight'. Crucially, had Bruford examined the texts of 'Mac an Ridire Albannaich' rather than the two he chose, he would have been struck by the impressive *consistency* with which Duncan told this particular tale: it is clear from a textual comparison that Donald John copied this from Craig's work as well. If this had happened, he might have reached different conclusions regarding the relative levels of Duncan's verbal consistency, as two of the four versions are virtually identical.

A final comment made by Bruford requires reconsideration. This is his claim that Duncan's versions of 'Fear na h-Eabaid' were not unique in their level of verbal consistency. He averred that the other hero tales told by him and published by Craig in *Sgialachdan Dhunnchaidh* were even more verbally consistent, or at least similarly so.[53] As can be seen in Table 3 above, however, this is not the case: 'Fear na h-Eabaid' was the most consistently told of Duncan's tales by some margin. Perhaps the reason that Bruford thought the others were at least as close, and maybe even closer, is that there were fewer versions of them available for comparison. This would have made the proximity between Donald John's and Craig's texts more impressive. Whereas two of the six versions of 'Fear na h-Eabaid' (33%) were virtually identical, because of Donald John's dependence on Craig, the proportion would have been 2:4 for the other tales in the book (i.e. 50%). Ross[54] may have also been influenced in the same way judging by his own comments about 'Fear na h-Eabaid' (see note 23). It appears that Donald John's misrepresentation of his sources has caused an unfortunate amount of misunderstanding about the verbal consistency with which Duncan and Neil MacDonald told their tales.

Conclusions

Although the present analysis does not support the position that one can differentiate between the hero tales and *Märchen* of Duncan MacDonald on the basis of verbal

consistency *per se*, might there still be linguistic distinctions between them? This is certainly plausible. As Bruford and Zall have indicated,[55] there are differences in the reoccurring, formulaic language of the two genres, for instance in the types of runs that one finds. Furthermore, as mentioned above, the Dice coefficient is insensitive to syntax. With a different approach, we might find in the future that clusters of fossilised language are longer and more frequent in the hero tales. Certainly, Donald Archie MacDonald made a strong case for the retention of older words and phrases in an oralised version of a literate story[56] over many generations.[57] On the other hand, we should be open to the possibility that this phenomenon is not restricted to the romances and is actually a feature of Scottish Gaelic oral narrative at large. If we possessed written versions of Scottish Gaelic *Märchen* from several hundred years ago, we might discover that 'poetic' language and dialogue in this genre is similarly maintained over time. To investigate this, we could extrapolate from synchronic data,[58] incorporating multiple variants from various storytellers across a region. Finally, a large study of register variation in Gaelic traditional narrative might discover that the greater situational formality associated with the hero tales correlates, as would be expected, with certain discrete linguistic characteristics. In conclusion, although the current findings indicate that Duncan MacDonald's hero tales were not distinguishable from his *Märchen* on the basis of verbal consistency, as has been claimed in the past, there are many more stones remaining to be turned in this particular field.

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NOTES

[1] Early Modern Gaelic was the *lingua franca* of the old, educated orders of Gaelic Scotland and Ireland. It was employed in the bardic and prose tradition approximately from the twelfth until the eighteenth century. The tales in manuscript that we are discussing here were composed largely between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries (Bruford, 1966), although they were still being copied and recited from into the nineteenth century in Munster (Ó Duilearga, 1945).

[2] Bruford, 1966, 123.

[3] Bruford, 1963-65, 1.

[4] *Ibid.*, 2.

[5] Which, we can imagine, subsequently continued their lives alongside the literary ones, and were influenced by them. This does seem to be the situation in one or two cases, such as *Eachtra Chéadaigh Mhóir* (ECM), but it may be that ECM ultimately derives from an earlier, lost literary work; the 19th cent mss seem to be based upon oral versions that may themselves have been based upon a non-extant written one (Bruford, 1966)

[6] By cataloguing the motif clusters found in the stories and examining parallels in known international folktales, it may be possible to shed some light on this issue, much in the same way that Hansen (2002) exposed the folkloristic roots of various Greek mythological stories.

[7] Bruford, 1966; Dòmhnallach, 1989.

[8] Chafe, 1982.

[9] Bruford, 1979.

[10] Better known to Gaelic speakers as *Dunnchadh Clachair*—'Duncan the Stonemason'—or by his patronymic *Dunnchadh 'ac Dhòmhnaill 'ic Dhunnchaidh*, Duncan MacDonald is arguably one of the most important tradition bearers of twentieth-century Europe (for biographies see Matheson 1977; MacGillEathain 1954).

[11] The word *Märchen* is usually translated as 'fairy tales', but as the tales rarely involve fairies as such, this is misleading. They are usually thought of as the long, involved wonder tales (e.g. 'Snow White' and 'Cinderella') spanning the numbers 300-745 in the Aarne-Thompson classification system (see Thompson, 1977, 7-8). They are found around the world in various guises.

[12] This citation refers to *Sgialachdan Dhunnchaidh*, which appears to have actually been published in 1950, judging by comments made by Calum Maclean and Duncan himself (see MacGillEathain, 1954; Matheson, 1977). The only date referred to in the book's front matter is the year in which the stories were collected, i.e. 1944.

[13] Bruford, 1979, 34-35.

[14] *Ibid*., 35.

[15] Bruford, 1981, 104.

[16] *Ibid.,* 36.

[17] *Ibid.*, 36.

[18] *Iain mac Dhòmhnaill 'ic Thormoid* ('John son of Donald son of Norman'), a prodigious storyteller of the eighteenth century (Bruford, 1996).

[19] Shaw, 1999.

[20] Campbell, 1994.

[21] Although this is a topic for further study, it is worth mentioning here the proscription of turn taking, the removal of head coverings (e.g. caps) before hero tales as a sign of reverence, the verbal and semantic disassociation of the storyteller from his story (seen in statements such as *mas e breug bhuam e 's e breug ugam e* 'if it was a lie from me, then it was a lie to me'), the unintelligible words featuring in certain tales—as a result of half-remembered Classical Gaelic, for instance (forgotten etymology is a common feature of ritualistic language: see Akinnaso, 1985)—and the

fact that women were all but prohibited from reciting hero tales (but, intriguingly, not heroic lays).

[22] There have been very few studies of register variation in Scottish Gaelic, but see Lamb, 2008 for a quantitative, corpus-based analysis of eight registers, including traditional narrative.

[23] Cf. James Ross' comment about Duncan's storytelling technique: 'each telling of [his] story was not an impromptu recasting of it, drawing freely on formulaic elements, but the recitation of a prepared narrative in which not only the plot was preserved but also a very near approximation to the precise verbal form. In such a case, the teller is not drawing on elements of traditional diction as the development of the plot may require them but is delivering a static text which is seen to contain such elements when compared with other texts' (Ross, 1959, 12).

[24] These are the Calum Maclean Collection and Tobar an Dualchais/ Kist o' Riches websites. These may be accessed at www.calum-maclean.celtscot.ed.ac.uk/ and www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/.

[25] Lamb, 2011.

[26] Donald John MacDonald (1919-1986) was Duncan's son. He was a celebrated Gaelic poet and author, and worked on a part-time, casual basis for the School of Scottish Studies between 1953 and 1958. His work is in twenty-six bound volumes (sixty-nine books) and can be located in the Upper Library of the School. He submitted over 1500 manuscript pages attributed to Duncan alone (Hillers, 2007; MacGillEathain, 1954), and a substantial number to his uncle Neil as well. See Lamb (2011) for more information.

[27] Craig, 1947.

[28] MacDhòmhnaill & Craig, 1950

[29] The version of this story attributed to Duncan in Donald John MacDonald's mss—as well as the one attributed to Neil—is almost certainly taken from Craig, 1947.

[30] 'The Man Who Took the Woman out of "Turkey"'. International placenames in Gaelic folktales were generally used simply to convey the notion of a far-away and exotic place. 'Turkey', in this case, referred to the 'land of the heathens', as during the Crusades.

[31] Entitled 'Eilean an Òir' ('The Island of Gold') in Calum Maclean's mss.

[32] See: www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/fullrecord/49451/. The first 752 words were transcribed for the current study.

[33] 'The Story of the Son of the Scottish Knight'

[34] Entitled 'Alasdair Mór Mac Riogh [sic] na h-Eiphit' ('Big Alexander the Son of the King of Egypt').

[35] 'How the Crofter's Daughter Took out the Laird'. Technically, this is a novella rather than of the *Märchen*-type, but the two genres are considered to be very similar to one another (see Thompson 1977, 8).

[36] 'The Three Sons of the King of Ireland'

[37] See www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/fullrecord/23094/1. The first 1052 words were transcribed for the current study.

[38] www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/fullrecord/25236/1

[39] 'The Adventure of Manus'

[40] www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/fullrecord/25177/1

[41] 'The Man of the Habit'

[42] www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/fullrecord/24955/1

[43] 'The Story of the Big *Tuaireisgeul*'.

[44] www.tobarandualchais.co.uk/fullrecord/24966/1

[45] SQA, 2009.

[46] Scott, 2011.

[47] For more information on this and similar statistics, see Alzahrani et al, 2011.

[48] N-grams are essentially clusters of text or characters: the string 'clusters of text' would be a 3-word n-gram, or a 'tri-gram'.

[49] So, Tale 1, Text 1 was compared to Tale 1, Text 2; then Tale 1, text 2 was compared with Tale 1, text 3 and so on. After all of the versions of one tale were compared to each other, the next tale was examined. The Dice values for the individual texts were then averaged together to obtain the mean relation value for that tale, as reported in Table 3.

[50] Bruford, 1979.

[51] See Lamb, 2011.

[52] Craig, 1947.

[53] Bruford, 1979, 34.

[54] Ross, 1959.

[55] Bruford, 1966; Zall, 2007-2010.

[56] *Viz*. ‘An Ceatharnach Caol Riabhach’ (‘The Slim Swarthy Champion’). See also his earlier English-language article about this tale, co-authored with Alan Bruford (MacDonald and Bruford, 1970).

[57] Dòmhnallach, 1989.

[58] Such an approach is used in historical genetics and dialectology (see Ó Dochartaigh, 1997, 51-53), and is, of course, the very basis of the historic-geographic method used in folklore research (Thompson, 1977).